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Interview with David Wyrick (FA 1098)

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**Kentucky Folklife Program
Interview Transcription**

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Interviewee: David Wyrick

Interviewer/Recordist: Brent Björkman

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Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.

Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.

Use of em dash — indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.

Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.

Use of quotations “ ” indicates dialogue within conversation.

Use of italics indicates emphasis.

Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.

Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.

Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

Note: This transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing this event.

[time elapsed in hours:minutes:seconds]

[00:00:00]

BRENT BJÖRKMAN: Today is April 24, 2014. This is Brent Björkman the Director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. Continuing our work on the Ranger Lore project for the Library of Congress and the American Folklife Center. Part of looking at occupational folk culture of the United States and we are looking at the multi-faceted working lives of park rangers. I've been doing this for most of the morning into the afternoon and I have a guest here today. Could you, David, could you say your name and your, and your job title []?

DAVID WYRICK: Yeah. I'm David Wyrick and I'm chief of interpretation at Mammoth Cave National Park.

BB: David, can you tell me a little bit about, I've been asking people kind of the origin story, how they got connected to the job or, or to parks in general? The answers vary and they're all very interesting. So if you could give me yours, that would be great.

DW: Well, I grew up in, in Carlsbad, New Mexico. My family, my, was very outdoors type people. My dad used to take us, we'd call it "out riding the roads," and we'd go driving at night, anytime during the day, just seeing what kinds of animals we could find. And, and my mom was kind of a rock hound and loved geology, and she would take us out and talk about geology and so that was kind of, one of our entry, you know, one of the things we got into and sparked my interest. We lived close to Carlsbad Caverns, so we went into that park quite a bit. And around the Guadalupe Mountains area, Guadalupe Mountains National Park. So that, that started me kind of early. My grandfather was a forest ranger for the state of Oklahoma and every summer our vacations went to go see Grandpa and he had the coolest job in the world. It was—

BB: You went on, went with him on, while he was working?

DW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'd go, he lived out at a tower. He had a tower. And so he lived out, five, his nearest neighbor was five miles away and so he lived on top of this mountain with this tower and a creek below and just, you know, it was outhouse and just, I mean, it was

just backwoods. And it was just, you know, that was, and I always admired what he did and, and I guess I kind of thought that, I looked at him as a park ranger, not a forest ranger, I guess. Felt like a park I guess. And I was one of those lucky ones, I think, that always knew what they wanted to do.

BB: Wow. So then, what, some people talk about this happened, or military service happened, or I was into geology and this happened—so how did you start to formulate yourself in, with the trajectory?

DW: Well, I think every since I can remember I said that I wanted to be a park ranger. So I think even in grade school. So I, that was always my goal and when I graduated high school that I was going to find a college that had, that taught you what you needed to learn to be a park ranger. And, and so I ended up with a degree from Eastern Washington University in parks administration. And so, you know, of course everybody, you, you change around and, and you kind of lose sight of your goals sometimes and, and that happened to me at times, but then I, you know, really always knew what I wanted to be and came back to the park service, so.

BB: Did you start in the park service after the degree or did you—

DW: No. I taught scuba diving (laughs) in, out of Portland, Oregon. And I worked for a shop there and we'd teach, do check out dives in the San Juan Islands in the Seattle area and stuff like that. So, so I got into scuba diving and, and did that for a while. Probably almost two years, I guess. And, and decided actually my next job from there was, I worked on a forest tower. (laughs) So I, I got a summer job working for the forest service in Lincoln National Forest where Smokey Bear is from. And, and worked on the tower for the summer and from there went right straight to Carlsbad Caverns. And worked there for the, a little while there, so. [0:05:00]

BB: So, yeah, so you went back to the, to the home, the homeplace.

DW: Yeah. Um-hm. And Lincoln National Forest in, in New Mexico was really a couple of hours from my home. So, then they offered me a job, a seasonal job at Carlsbad Caverns and I started working there.

BB: Wow. Were you guiding trips? Were you interpreting, doing interpretation?

DW: Yeah. Yeah, I was doing interpretation. I was doing tours, bath light talks in the evenings and, and just, it was a guide job and then finished, after my season finished that up.

BB: What was your first week like at this, when you first started doing interpretive work after the tower? I'm, I'm just curious about people's first forays into doing—

DW: First impression, my first impression there was maybe surprising. (laughs) Because I was thinking, boy I picked the wrong career. I, the way things were set up schedule-wise there was you would spend about six hours at, at, at, probably about six hours on the average in the cave itself, in the darkness. And I was more of a surface, I mean I, I just, I needed the sunlight. (laughs) You know, and it was cold, damp, you were standing around. The way they did tours, you did then, you pretty much, it was, a lot of it was, we didn't have a lot of the, the, the wild caving tours that they have now and the different guided tours that, that we do now. You, it was self-guided. People went through the big room. You roamed around that then you worked your way to the Queen's Chamber and you would stand there for, in one spot for about an hour, maybe just a little bit to walk. And then you'd move over to the King's Palace and, and, and you'd stay in that spot. And it got cold. You weren't moving around much. People treat a cave, when they're in it like on a self-guided tour like that, like it's a church. They're very quiet. They're not, you know, they're walking around in awe. So they really don't have many questions and then you slowly work your way out. And you just, you wonder what the weather is like outside. You're just—and it was just, by the end of the day, you're just so ready to, to talk to people or do something, do

something different. Not that I didn't talk to people there. It was just that it, it was not, not what I expected I guess. And so, I was, it was hard, I thought, and kind of disappointing. And that's one of the reasons I got out of, kind of got misguided again.

BB: For just a, a period of time, just got into another line of work?

DW: Right, right. And so it took me a while, I did a lot of things. I taught gymnastics for fifteen years. And I was a, that helped me get through college. I was a gymnast too. And so I taught that and realized that wasn't a, a big career thing. (laughs) So that's the, worked my way to Maryland and that's when I, I was doing the construction and gymnastics and, and I was, of course, I was a construction superintendent for, I probably built 250 homes and, I don't know, three, four subdivisions in, in Maryland, DC area, Virginia. Did some commercial construction. And kind of did the, still kind of weekends did the gymnastics thing and taught, did that stuff and then decided that I was missing a lot of my life and applied for the, a job as a ranger on the National Mall and started back again and never looked back.

BB: That's great. Well maybe that was important time that you were able to work at the park in that particular context. To not, maybe, in that initial context of the cave and, and—

DW: Yeah, it was just, and I realized that, that it was just, I, it wasn't the resource itself, it was, it was how I was working in the resource. My schedule. And it wasn't the way I, I liked it, you know, I guess, and— [0:10:00]

BB: Were your parks, the DC and the east coast parks that you worked at, can you tell us a little bit about those? And was that a different kind of scheduling thing and more conducive to your sensibilities?

DW: Right. Well, you're outside on the National Mall. I guess interpretation, I'm a people person. You have to be a people person. And I love talking to people. And I think

interpreters in some ways are, are kind of hams. But you need that interaction. I think interpreters learn as much as, from the people they interact with as what they hope they're teaching people, you know, educating people. But that's, I, so I really enjoyed it. DC was just, the commute really stunk, but the, the, the interaction and the things going on, and the people I met, and, and I think the stories of that, the history I was able to learn, or I had to learn, and of some of our iconic presidents and stuff will just really phenomenal for me. It was, it was stirring, it was very, it just, I guess made you very proud of the accomplishments that you get through, through learning about your forefathers and stuff. So that really, I think that had a huge impression on me at that time. It was just, I have so much to learn and I have so much to tell, you know. (laughs)

BB: I can just imagine. I'm thinking about the interpret-, the interpretive things I've heard about here. You know, could you speak to me, I've had people speak to me here about the mentorship, maybe you're starting by you're trailing—

DW: Um-hm.

BB: A cave tour and maybe it's not called mentorship, but, you know, how, did you have certain people? Don't have to name names, but when you were starting back and you were at, in DC and, and feeling really good about things? Did you have co-workers? Can you tell me about those interactions with those co-workers?

DW: I, well, yeah, we had, the co-workers, and they were just a variety, variety of personalities. There were about fifty people on, on, rangers on the national Mall you work with and so, you know, like any other job you have some, some that are, you know, you just kind of look up to and they, they know their stuff, they do very well, great interpreters. And you, you al-, but you also learn that, that you can't do what they do exactly. You have to get your own style. You have to learn, you know, put your personality into it. You got to learn to do the things that you love and then you become, I feel you become a good interpreter because you, you maybe like the way people do things and, but you can't mimic them, but

you can, you can also have them as mentors as far as helping you, you learn your style. I had supervisors, really good supervisors. I had some, some that weren't so good, but supervisors that, you know, you knew cared and would help you with, with ways to, to improve, to train, to move your career ahead and, you know, make your contacts, help you make your contacts and those kinds of things. There were some really, really I think, my first initial, I really feel like that, that was my first initial, and then the National Mall was my first initial introduction to what it really means to be a park ranger. Not that I didn't love the caverns, because I got a chance to go back there and make, do some changes, make some changes that I remembered from my career, my first entrance on there, and hopefully make it a better place. But there was those things that I really disliked and I knew that a lot of people disliked spending so much time in the cave and not really getting out in the sunlight and having that change and stuff. I felt like I was able to make some of those changes [0:15:00] and, and, and contribute to that, so it's, that, you know, I got to go back to a wonderful resource and, and, and hopefully make it a little m-, help to make it a little better place to work too.

BB: Yeah, I think about, you have to, you were speaking about people you'd watched or you admired their content maybe. How did you, developing your own style, did, did the park make room for you? I know it's important here. Did the park then, in DC, make, give you time to be able to go and research? You mentioned ways to train, to become better. Is some, is part of that finding your own re-, your own, doing your own research and looking up things and, is that part of the—

DW: Yeah, that, well, it's a huge part of it. I mean, you know, a job, the job is, as a park ranger, is what you make of it. It really is. I mean, because you can do as much as you want. And there, fortunately, there was enough staff to, to, to develop, if you wanted to develop any, just about any type of program you wanted, there, at that time, there was enough staff to be able to, for you to do the research. I mean, there were, and there was always things going on. When I was there, it was the fiftieth anniversary of the, I can remember one, one particular program was the fiftieth anniversary of the, of the Jefferson Memorial. And so we

had a huge program going on there. And we were able to, to spend our time going to the Library of Congress, researching history about it, getting pictures, doing whatever we needed to do to develop programs and we had a big weekend long celebration and, and with different programs. The post office had its own stamp there. President Clinton talked, spoke, spoke at it. And it was, so, it was, there, there's always things like that going on. It seems like that, that, that you have a chance to be a part of, and, and, and there's so many different subjects from the different wars. The Korean, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, you know, the Vietnam War, you're studying about Lincoln, Jefferson, Washington, Pierre L'Enfant, just the whole plan of the city. We used to give, you know, at times I gave tours of the city and Arlington Cemetery and those, you know, those kinds of things. So there's just a multitude of whatever you want to learn. It's going to be up to you, so.

BB: If you're engaging and engage with others—

DW: Right.

BB: You can, you could write your own ticket as far as interpretation within the—

DW: Within the realm of, yeah, of, of course, of, of, within the theme or the mission of that site, you know. So it's really, there it was an open book because there are so many subjects.

BB: Yeah. Then you went back to Carlsbad for a little while and...

DW: I was back in Carlsbad. Well, from the National Mall, I went to Fort Sumter, and so I was in Charleston, South Carolina area and worked at Fort Sumter and that was a really—well, I forgot. From the National Mall, I went to Rock Creek Park, which was within the city of DC. And I was there for a year working at the Old Stone House in, in Georgetown. And which was an interesting site. And it was one of, one of the, I guess it's the oldest building in the Georgetown area, in the DC area. And it was a good example of a carpenter's house. It was just an interesting story. Then it was one of those stories where the park service, the,

the, the, I guess it was the lore that this was an old tavern that Pierre L'Enfant and George Washington planned the city of Washington from. And later on the parks service found out, really, that's, that's what they acquired, they acquired the property and after extensive research, found out that really wasn't. But it was a good example of a carpenter's house (laughs) in, in DC and it was, and just a beautiful old setting. But, and, and so I guess that's, that kind of was an interesting story in itself. [0:20:00] But then I went from there to Fort Sumter National Monument in, in Charleston, South Carolina and did some, learned history about the Civil War, (laughs) talked a lot about the Civil War. Then I—

BB: You talked, thinking about you, you have this new position as Chief of Interpretation here, relatively, a couple of months in. And you, you made reference to going back and making some changes at Carlsbad. Was this move into Rock Creek and to, then to Fort Sumter, were you working your way into a new GS code position? Were you, did you have some, I don't know what, I don't know if it's climbing the ladder, I mean, is there like, you had newer duties or different—

DW: Right. Yeah. With working, when I started on the National Mall, I was a GS4. Temporary park ranger. There was at the time one, well, really, to be honest with you, what happened was, was one Fourth of July, it's kind of, you work sixteen hours, you have a sixteen hour day on the Fourth of July in DC. And after that, the park service had temporary employees. I was a temporary employee, not to exceed four years. And there was a maintenance man, the name Hudson, that, that, his, his last name was Hudson and I, I, I, sorry I forget the, his first name. But he had a heart attack after the Fourth of July and he was a temporary employee. And it, it, he had no benefits. So it spurred Congress to tell, it was kind of like the beginning, part of the beginning of, of ranger careers, but, but it spurred Congress and they created the Hudson Bill and told, which required them to, they, they required the National Mall to hire twenty-five permanent people. And that's how I got permanent. That I don't forget. It, it's hard to get to be a park ranger. You know, it's a very, very desired position and it's, you know, it's, I realized, you know, people, I waited four and a half years before I could get permanent. And so I don't forget, I don't think someone,

when they get their, first find out about their permanency as a park ranger, I don't think they forget that, and I don't, I don't forget that it was, you know, part of it was because somebody died. And so that's very important for me to remember. So it, so back to the question of progression. Did, I know I'm kind of all over the place.

BB: No, no, no. That's good.

DW: But, but the, the progression, yeah, I moved from Rock Creek Park and I beca-, to, when I moved to Rock Creek Park, I got to be a site manager of kind of, well, my title wasn't site manager, but I was the site manager, just, of this site, and took care of it myself. And so that, that gave me a lot more responsibility. From there, when I moved to Fort Sumter, I had the opportunity to become a lead ranger and do some hiring and you know just kind of work my way into, and a little bit of supervision, and, and, and that type of thing. And working also as a managing a site at, at Charles Pinkney National Historic Site, that was part of the Sum-, Fort Sumter group. So I gained that experience, teach, I think each time it's, you gain, it's gaining experience. You have to look at what the job is and, and you know, if it's moving you up that career path. When I moved to Carlsbad Caverns this second time, there was, I went there as a lateral. I was a GS9. By this time I'd become a GS9. And there was a lateral for a GS9. Of course it was going back home, which was kind of desirable for me at the time. And then I, I knew that there was an opening for a GS11 supervisor there, that it would happen. And my thought was, well, if I get there and show them how my work ethic and, and put a face to the person and the resume, that it might help me. And fortunately it worked out and so after about three months, I was a supervisor at the Caverns and then, [0:25:00] and I was a GS11 supervisor there. I moved from that as a lateral to a Chief of Interpretation at Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Montana. So this was a progression to be a chief, you know. I got more responsibility, maybe not more pay, but just more responsibility and to, to help me along in my career and that's, then, then I, that, from that transition, it was a chief, which was a GS12 in, in, at Natchez National Historical Park. So with more responsibility, I added, I was chief, there I was Chief of Interpretation and Cultural Resources. So well, chief, and, and so I had, it's a mainly

cultural park, but also had natural resources I had to take care of there too. So that was a big change and responsibility and, and just also a promotion. And from there to here at Mammoth Cave National Park to a GS13 level. And of course a huge responsibility (laughs) with the, the number of staff here.

BB: What is the staff, staff difference between Natchez and here?

DW: Well, Natchez, my staff was about fourteen. I think I had about fourteen people. And responsibility of directly and indirectly supervising fourteen people. But also with the cultural resources added onto it, with all that comes, with compliance and, and managing a, managing a resource as well as the interpreters. So it was really a much larger responsibility that just being a supervisor kind of at the Caverns, even though I had, at the Caverns, I had probably fifty employees and overall, here at Mammoth Cave, its over a hundred, so it's, it's, it's, I guess it's the level of, of money and number of people that you supervise that, that is the difference between the different parks.

BB: I was thinking about that story you just told about Hudson, the Hudson Bill.

DW: Um-hm.

BB: And it, I think it just shows how much you all care about people and comrades and do you have anything to talk about or your, I mean that's just such a poignant piece that you don't, like you said, you'll never forget that. And I've had a lot of those types of stories about intimacy with colleagues and, and—

DW: Um-hm.

BB: And just this wonderful kind of way. Do you have anything that you want to share about particular people who just made your life really great or you worked as a team or—

DW: I think that's, I think that's why I like it. I know I'm going to like it here.

BB: What was your first, first indicator that, I mean other than on paper you thought this would be a great challenge, but when you got here on-site, what made you—

DW: Well, it was before I got here. People reached out to me. And you know, just willing to help, you know, with the transition, the move, you know, whatever you need. I'll take your, you know, I'll take your wife around, show her, show her around. You know, I was, just all these kinds of offers like this, that all right these are good people. And just the welcoming I had and it was, it was kind of the, it reminded me, it reminds me a lot of, of my time at the Caverns too, you know, because it's really, there's, there's a whole lot of parallels in how a cave park is run. And the folks at the Cavern, [0:30:00] you have to work together. When you're in a park like this, you have to work together. You have to pull together. There's so many challenges. There's so many, you know, emergencies that may come up with, with carry-outs, things that you have to pull together to do that takes sometimes ev-, you know people from all divisions in the park together to pull together to make something happen. The Caverns was a family like that. I mean you had a whole bunch of people together and, and they, they had to, you know, it, it was a huge job to coordinate it. And people knew that. And people know how difficult it is for, you know, like, the operations supervisor to, to, to coordinate everything that goes on in a place like this. And so everybody seems to be willing to pitch in and do their job, no questions, do the best they can and, and, and just get it done. When you need it, they pull together in a place like this. And you know, I saw that immediately.

BB: Yeah. It is an amazing place. I've been asking people about stewardship, concepts, personal concepts of stewardship. Everything points to a deep feeling for what you're doing here.

DW: Um-hm.

BB: What, what, what is a ranger do and, and how are they stewards? In what way?

DW: Well, I've, I guess I've been fortunate enough to work in natural and historical areas. You know, historical parks. And I find that people are passionate about both and sometimes they don't, the reason that they're, they're, you know, a historian, the reason that they're passionate about it, as far as an interpreter goes, I'd say is because, because they're there, they know they're there to tell, to remind people of what we've done good, what we've done bad, you know, where we're going to from here and how important it is to remember what our country has done or what people, you know, the different sacrifices or, or, or, or where we're going so that we don't, well, to remember, to remember those things so that we don't make the same mistakes again, you know. But that we continue to grow and move forward so I think people just get really passionate about that and the history part of it. The same thing in natural areas, in natural parks. We've made some mistakes, you know, the park service has made mistakes in trying to, to, as stewards. We all do. And then we, we're learning and we're growing as we go along by research, by, by just getting out in the resource and trying things. And then you look back and say, well, did that really work? So you're constantly looking for better, better ways to do things. And so that we are, rangers are passionate about leaving the place for future generations. And in, in good shape, sometimes hopefully in better shape. And so I think that's the, that's, that, to me that's the take-away. That's why, that's why rangers do it, is because they realize what they are there for and, and, and they also, they're looking at the big picture, but they're also realizing what their, their little part in it is. That, that, that it does contribute to that whole mission of, of preservation and conservation for, for the general public. I mean it's, and, and future generations, so, so people are passionate, you know, rangers are passionate about it for different reasons, but I think it all boils down to that, you know, that, that it's, you know, we're here for the public and we're here for the, the resource, you know, whether it's history, historical resource, or whether it's a natural resource. [0:35:00]

BB: You got so much of both here.

DW: Yeah. And you, yeah. Here it's got a combination of everything, you know.

BB: What are your hopes for, I mean, it's, it's really great to meet with you and learn about your trajectory and you're very new here, and you have aspirations, you know. What are you, what are you hoping, what are you hoping for your—

DW: Well, I've still got a lot to learn. I've got to learn, yeah, I've got to, I've got to learn the resource myself. And I just, I, you know, I want to see us move, continue, you know, I want to see the park continue to move forward with ways that we can connect to the visitors and connect to the public, our partners, our, our, our community, all the communities around in ways that they understand and they buy into that stewardship and help us actually learn new ways to, to better manage our resource and to tell its stories. I mean, I think that's, to me, that's, with the history part of it here, to help tell the stories so that we have them, you know, because it's, this park is, is different in a way that it's not just like you said, the natural resource. It's got all that history of the people here that, that is, a lot of it's still out there that we don't know about. And I, I hope to, you know, as I'm here that, you know, we, we gain some more knowledge, we also learn better ways to connect with the people and the visitors and be able to tell some of those stories.

BB: That's great. Thank you.

DW: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]